



Columbia River Regional Initiative

A better way to manage water

OBJECTIVES

A workable and sustainable, state water-management program for the Columbia River that:

- Allows the basin's economy to grow, diversify and be sustained.
- Reflects sound, scientific information.
- Meets the needs of a growing population and a healthy economy while also meeting the needs of fish and healthy watersheds.

RATIONALE

Competition for water from the river has continued to escalate. There are hundreds of pending applications in Washington for new water rights from the Columbia, and there is little agreement on the stream flows needed to support salmon. Litigation is being used increasingly to try to drive water policy, but it is resulting in additional gridlock. The purpose of the Columbia River Regional Initiative is to develop an integrated state program that will allow access to the river's water resources while providing support for salmon recovery.

SCOPE AND PRODUCTS

The initiative will result in rule-making to establish a new water management program for the Columbia River that defines how the Department of Ecology will carry out its dual obligations to allocate water and preserve a healthy environment. To do this appropriately, Ecology is seeking scientific advice about the relative effects of off-stream uses in comparison to existing hydropower and fisheries uses of the river. The question of scale is important because off-stream water needs may not insignificantly affect other uses of the river.

Products

- A new rule that establishes a state program for managing new and existing water uses from the river, including permit review procedures and water-use efficiency incentives and requirements.
- An agenda of actions needed to enhance water supply (access and reliability) and to address the needs of fish.
- A related funding program to help cover the costs of water-supply projects.

CURRENT IDEAS

Access to the John Day – McNary Reservation

Water resources available in the reservation will be a crucial part of any new water management program for the basin. Ecology will seek to make a significant portion of the reservation available for current and future uses.

Fostering a Water Market

Perhaps the most efficient mechanism for allocating water among current and potential users is a water market. Ecology will seek to support a water market by using flexibility in approving transfers, supporting the creation of a water bank, and establishing water masters.

Water Infrastructure

The Governor is expected to propose a funding package to pay for needed improvements or new development of water-supply projects, such as storage and conservation.

NEAR-TERM ACTIONS

Gathering Ideas and Comments

Department of Ecology representatives will meet with interested and affected parties to explore creative solutions to the management problem at hand. Ideas harvested from these meetings will be used to develop an outline of the water management program by January 2003. This approach also will be used to modify the draft rule prior to publishing a formal version for public comment.

Economic Review

The Department of Ecology will direct a study of Columbia Basin economics and how water use is related to economic productivity. The review will provide guidance on how to maximize the benefits that result from providing access to water.

Some of these economic opportunities will cost more than individuals and rural communities alone can afford. In addition, the statewide benefits that come from protecting and supporting salmon and a healthy environment will require government participation to pay for the public interest that is at stake.

National Science Review

As part of the regional initiative, the state will secure a formal and independent review of the science of fish survival and hydrology in the Columbia River. This review will be conducted through the National Academy of Sciences or similar national science body. The state will pay for this review. Regional scientists will be asked to help inform the national review.

Permit Processing

Ongoing litigation constrains Ecology's ability to issue permits in the short-term. The primary, longer-term goal of the initiative is to enable water-rights decision-making in a manner that secures real water for off-stream needs and supports salmon recovery in the Columbia.

Federal Negotiations

The state will seek agreements with affected federal agencies to define concrete steps that can be taken to satisfy Endangered Species Act responsibilities as well as develop water-resource opportunities that may have multiple beneficiaries.

SCHEDULE

The products of the regional initiative will be completed by March 2004.

<i>July–December 2002</i>	Meet with interested parties, design a draft rule, and begin economic and scientific reviews.
<i>Early 2003</i>	Gather/analyze information needed to modify the draft rule and begin to develop management alternatives; file a draft rule for public review and comment.
<i>Late 2003</i>	Complete public review of the rule (water management program).
<i>Early 2004</i>	Adopt final rule.